Blackboard Discussion Boards

Why use discussion boards?

With distance learning, students might not get the chance to see each other physically like traditional students do. They can miss out on that irreplaceable interaction. More specifically, they can miss out on valuable and essential discussions about learning. By creating discussion boards, you can attempt to replicate this and give students a space to discuss a range of articles.

Terminology

Discussion boards in Blackboard use a few key ideas and terms:

- Posts
    - Every time you write something, you make a post
- Forums
    - A forum is a concept/idea/discussion point
- Threads
    - Threads make up the content of a forum. When you make a post, you are either starting a new thread or contributing to an existing thread.
- List View
    - Material is displayed by showing the first thread only
- Tree View
    - Material is displayed by showing the first thread by default but with the option of expanding the tree and showing all threads at once

Discussion boards allow students to:

- Develop deeper learning through discourse
- Develop debating skills
- Interact with their peers
- Ask questions
- Keep up to date with developments
- Customise their view of the discussions

Discourse

Discourse is at the centre of social constructivism. Vygotsky was very keen to promote the use of discussion as a way of developing deeper learning. As students think about the discussion topic, they are creating a better understanding of the topic, constructing their own ideas further. By discussing these ideas, they are given the opportunity to express these ideas and then reflect further on the topics. In addition, through public discourse others can read, comment and reflect.

Debating Skills

Continuing the notion of constructivism, debating topics is another way that learning can take place. Piaget is often cited as saying that a good argument can help to get students thinking more deeply as they engaged in the debate. Debating skills can also develop critical thinking. Friere was keen to promote to the notion of critical pedagogy and this can be achieved through debating and discussing various topics.

Unlike other tools (like blogs for example) students can reply to individual threads. This can make for complex reading but it also allows for topics to go off-thread without ruining the flow of conversation.

There is always the danger that some students will dominate the board – just as in a classroom environment. But, just like in a classroom, the moderator has a certain degree of control over the proceedings. Some argue that a discussion board allows for those quieter students the opportunity to "speak up". The same goes for students whose second language is English. A discussion board gives them the time to get their point across if they are not confident to openly speak out. As before, it could also be argued that those students who are quiet may well be quiet on an online forum. Research shows that there is no conclusive evidence either way unfortunately.

Interaction

Students studying at a distance have a very different experience to those who study in a more traditional sense. They may never get to meet face to face their fellow students. This could impact on their study experience. They may not engage with the course without that cohort identity and support of their peers. A discussion board could be a way to get students to interact with each other. You can use a discussion board to get students to introduce themselves, maybe talk a little bit about themselves and so on. There are some dangers here and what follows are some quick hints and tips that may be of use.

Ice Breakers

It's not always easy to get people to engage with a discussion board. We could also argue that it's not always easy to get people to speak out in class. One approach to breaking down this reticence is to have an ice breaker session. A few ideas that have been shared include things like: introduce yourself in 10 words or less; if you were a vegetable what vegetable would you be and why; name a favourite holiday destination; suggest a reason why you are on the course. These are not fool proof, but from research it appears the less chance for "one-up man ship" the more likely there is of engagement.

Instructions, Instructions and More Instructions

Gilly Salmon talks a lot about how students will need a lot of help to begin with. She outlines a very clear 5 stage approach, taking steps to help students not only get to grip with the technology but also get to grips with discussing in a public forum (public meaning public to members of the module). She stresses that clear and concise instructions are crucial in the early stages of discussion board development if you want your students to use them fully. Whilst her approach might be very didactic, putting in some more verbose instructions may actually be a key point to success.

Groupings

Whilst it would be great if all your students were taking part in a discussion there is research that shows an optimum number of students for a discussion to work is no more than 15. One approach might be to have a general discussion board to cover anything. But also consider grouping your students (something that is possible in Blackboard) and discussing more specific topics.

Questions

Depending on what you want from the discussion board, it can be a great place where both Staff AND students can pose questions. This could be technical questions such as where to find an assignment brief, how to upload work, and so on. Again, depending on what you want to happen you might want to leave off answering immediately. Giving the students space to answer could give them more autonomy and ownership of their own learning experience.

Keeping Up To Date

If all goes well and the discussion board is active, Blackboard offers the opportunity to subscribe. You can subscribe to either a particular thread or an entire forum. This is a feature that could be useful for staff as well as students. It can be used to email you directly the activity going on within the discussion board. Whilst you might be worried about getting swamped with emails you can always set up a rule within Outlook to automatically put all posts from a forum into a specific folder within Outlook.

Alternatively, Blackboard also keeps a record of activity that has taken place within all your modules. In the top right hand side of the screen you can gain access to all activity that is going on.

Students can do exactly the same. They can subscribe to threads or forums (this is something you as moderator can control). It's entirely up to them whether they subscribe or not. Going back to an earlier comment about giving plenty of guidance and instructions, it might be pertinent to introduce the notion of subscribing to students. As it may not be obvious to some, or if a student has never engaged with this form of learning the ability to subscribe might be a very rewarding feature.

Customisation

The way a discussion board is displayed allows students a degree of flexibility depending on their needs. The two main ideas are:

- List View
    - This shows the first thread only. Subsequent threads are displayed when the student opens up the first thread.
- Tree View
    - As with list view, the initial display is to show only the first thread. However, there are options to expand a particular thread or expand all threads. This allows the student to view more information at a glance.

By having different ways to access the discussion board, different learning styles are accommodated. Those who prefer a holistic approach can expand everything whereas those who prefer to focus on the fine details can read threads one at a time.

Another handy feature is that students can flag posts that they have read. This can allow those who want to "declutter" the board by reminding themselves that they've finished a particular thread. Or alternatively flagging something important to come back to at a later date.

If a student is brave enough, they may have uploaded an avatar (a small picture of themselves). This avatar will be displayed whenever they make a post. An avatar can be a visual representation of a student and can provide a cue as to who has made a particular post. It's entirely optional, but one which could make the experience a touch more personal. If you think of social media sites like Facebook or Twitter, they also use personal avatars and this is Blackboards attempt to bridge that gap.

To continue with the notion of social media, threads can be rated. It's a little bit like the option to "like" a post in Facebook. There are pros and cons of adopting such an approach. Does it help with a students' self-confidence if they see a post they wrote get 1 out of 5, where other posts get 5 out of 5? It's certainly something to consider, but something to consider carefully.

The slight danger of all these features is that there can be a technical overload, especially for those students who approach technology with some trepidation. This brings us back to our earlier discussion about providing clear instructions, and the possibility of adopting Salmon's approach to using discussion boards.

Conclusion

With a little bit of perseverance, the discussion boards in Blackboard offer a great deal of flexibility. The opportunities for communication and discussion can be crucial to the development of many distance courses. When looking at many courses held via distance delivery almost all contain a discussion board in some shape or form.